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A CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN NIETZSCHE AND STRINDBERG

BY HERMAN SCHEFFAUER.

It became known only recently that a most interesting, though brief, correspondence had taken place between Friedrich Nietzsche and August Strindberg. These two strange and mighty spirits had saluted each other from a distance, had exchanged a few ringing messages and then passed on—Nietzsche to that death in life which shrouded his mind in darkness and Strindberg, urged along by the whirlwinds of his tempestuous temperament, to new sorrows and disasters. The death of Strindberg in 1912 has apparently broken the seals of silence imposed upon his own letters, and the entire correspondence, after lying buried for twenty-five years, has now been given to the public for the first time by Frau Forster Nietzsche, the sister of the dead philosopher.

The first volley in this intense and pyrotechnic interchange of letters is given by Nietzsche in a long letter in which he lays bare his hope and his despair—an utterance already tinged with that fierce and tragic megalomania into which his long isolation and the indifference of the world had plunged him. The last letter, a mere line of three or four words is also written by Nietzsche. It is, to quote a simile used by himself in another place, “like a rifle-shot”—above his grave, one might add.

The feverish and rhapsodical note in Nietzsche’s letters is accounted for, not only by the dreadful loneliness of soul in which he found himself, but, also, by the fact that his super-normally active mind was already beginning to totter under the influence of overwork, illness, nervous strain and the effects of the drugs which he used to combat insomnia.

Some time before he entered into correspondence with

the Swedish man of letters, Nietzsche had made the acquaintance of Georg Brandes, the distinguished Danish critic who had called his attention to Strindberg as a mind more or less in affinity with his own. Brandes was perhaps the first European to give publicity to the thought and philosophy of Nietzsche, at that time a still unrisen sun in the firmament of modern Europe. Brandes had written articles and given lectures upon Nietzsche at Copenhagen. The teacher of the Superman had been deeply moved by this first public recognition. His heart was full of gratitude toward Brandes, but this recognition of his message by a foreigner merely increased Nietzsche's anger against the unbroken silence and indifference he encountered everywhere in his own Germany. The great truths he had discovered and proclaimed met with no response in Germany, fulfilling the ancient judgment sent upon the prophet, and this neglect bore upon his soul with a crushing force. All the more ardently, therefore, did he seek for recognition in other lands. He had just completed that strange work *Ecce Homo*, the burning biography of his soul, in which he crowns himself with the ultimate glory of all battles and all philosophies, and sits throned in victory upon the ruins of the old morality—the anti-Christ triumphant. He is anxious that this book be given to the world in four languages at once. This is his chief motive for addressing Strindberg. In this letter one is able to recognize a certain likeness to the expressions and attitude of mind in *Ecce Homo*:

“DEAR SIR:—The highly valued note of Monsieur Taine's which I inclose is my excuse for asking your advice in a matter of great importance to me. I am keenly anxious to obtain an audience in France, in fact this is for me an absolute necessity. Being, as I am, the most independent and perhaps the strongest spirit in our world to-day, one doomed to the fulfilment of a stupendous task, it is impossible that I should allow myself to be constrained from greeting the few persons willing to listen to me, by the barriers which an abominable dynastic national policy has erected between the peoples. And I gladly acknowledge that above all I seek such persons in France. I am well acquainted with all that transpires in the intellectual world of France. I am told that my manner of writing is really French, even though in my *Zarathustra*, I have attained a perfection in the German language unequalled hitherto by any other German.

“If I may be permitted to say so, my ancestors on my father's side were Polish noblemen, and my maternal grandmother lived in Weimar in the days of Goethe—all of which is sufficient reason for my being

in an almost unimaginable degree, the loneliest of all living Germans to-day. No word of recognition has ever come to me—and, honestly, I have never demanded it—now I have readers everywhere, in Vienna, in St. Petersburg, in Stockholm, in New York, all intelligences of the highest order, who do me honor. But such are wanting to me in Germany.

“Since the time when, at the age of twenty-four, I was called to a professorship at the University of Basle, it has, fortunately, not been necessary for me to maintain a constant warfare and to waste my energies in a reaction against adverse influences. In Basle I encountered the honored and venerable Jacob Burckhardt, who from the very beginning showed a great interest in me.—I also enjoyed a most intimate friendship with Richard Wagner and his wife who at that time lived at Tribschen, near Lucerne—a friendship in every way of the utmost value to me. It is possible that after all, I am myself a musician from of old.

“It was illness that forced me to withdraw myself from these relationships and then plunged me into a condition of the profoundest introspection—such as few men have ever been subject to. And since there is in my nature nothing that is either morbid or capricious, this loneliness has been to me, not an affliction, but rather an invaluable distinction, a state of *cleanliness*. No one has ever accused me of wearing a gloomy mien—not even myself. I believe that I have become familiar with more evil and more questionable worlds of thought than any one else, but only because it lies in my nature to love what lies apart. I account the spirit of gaiety as one of the proofs of my philosophy. . . . Perhaps I may be able to prove this to you in the two books which I send you to-day.

“Yours,

“FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE.”

Evidently, one of these books which Nietzsche sent to Strindberg was his *Zarathustra*. Its beauty of language and sublimity of thought must have aroused Strindberg's highest admiration, for in his reply to the foregoing letter, he writes:

“DEAR SIR:—There is no doubt that you have bestowed upon humanity the deepest book that it possesses, and moreover, have had the courage and possibly also the urging to spit these magnificent words straight into the faces of this pack of rogues! For that I thank you! Nevertheless it appears to me that in your liberality of spirit, you have to some degree flattered the criminal types. If you regard the hundreds of photographs which illustrate Lombroso's types of criminal, you will be convinced that the felon is a low sort of animal, a degenerate, a weakling who does not possess the necessary faculties to enable him to evade the more powerful laws which oppose themselves to his will and power. Just observe how stupidly moral most of these brutes really appear! What a disillusion for morality!

“And you desire to be translated into our Greenlandish tongue! Why

not into French or English? You may judge of our intelligence by the fact that there was talk of putting me into an asylum because of my tragedy, and that this mob-majority has succeeded in imposing silence upon so fine and lofty a spirit as Brandes.

"I conclude all my letters to my friends; Read Nietzsche! That is my *Carthago est delenda*!

"At all events your greatness will decline from the very moment when you become known and understood, and the dear mob begins to acclaim you as one of its own kidney. It is better that you preserve that aristocratic aloofness, and permit us other ten thousand spirits of finer fire to make pilgrimages to your holy of holies in order to refresh ourselves to the full. Let us guard the esoteric truth in order to keep it pure and whole, and not allow it to become common property save by means of devoted disciples—in whose name I sign myself,

"AUGUST STRINDBERG."

This letter gave the greatest joy to Nietzsche—he called it the "first letter of an historical significance which had ever reached him." The influence of his own thought upon Strindberg is noticeable in Strindberg's remarkable tale of *Tschandala* which he wrote about this time. The following letter was apparently written by Nietzsche before he had received the foregoing one from Strindberg. The books which had crossed each other were *The Twilight of the Idols* and *The Father*. The latter is Strindberg's tragedy which had just been translated into French under the title *Père* with a foreword by Zola.

"DEAR SIR:—I fancy our books must have crossed each other! I read your tragedy twice with the greatest emotion. I was astonished beyond all measure to find a work in which my own conception of love—war with regard to its means and in its fundamental laws, nothing less than the deadly hatred of the sexes,—had been expressed in so splendid a manner. This play is really destined to be performed at M. Antoine's Théâtre Libre in Paris! You ought to demand this of Zola. He is at this moment priding himself on the fact that he is attracting attention.

"I am inclined very much to regret the foreword he has contributed, though I should have been sorry to miss reading it—for it contains countless naïvetés. The fact that Zola cares nothing "for abstract qualities," reminds me of a German translator of one of Dostoieffsky's novels who also cared nothing for abstract qualities—he simply left out *des raccourcis d'analyse*—they discomfited him! How odd, too, that Zola is unable to distinguish between types and *Etres de raison*! and that he should demand the *état civil complet* for your tragedy! And when he finally tried to make a question of race of the whole matter, I almost shook with laughter! As long as taste really existed in France, the whole instinct of the race showed itself opposed to all that he represented—it is precisely the Latin race which protests against

Zola. In the final analysis he is a modern Italian—he worships the *verissimo*. . . .

“With expressions of my highest esteem,

Yours,
“NIETZSCHE.”

“Torino, Via Carlo, Alberto 6, III.

“Nov. 27, 1888.”

Now follows Nietzsche’s reply to Strindberg’s letter:

“TORINO, VIA CARLO, ALBERTO 6, III.

“DEAR SIR:—I have in the mean time received a copy of *Der Vater* from Germany—a proof that I am also trying to interest my friends in the father of *The Father*. M. Antoine’s theater is designed to risk new ventures. Your play in comparison with what has already been risked on that stage is absolutely innocent. It went so far that Albert Wolf in a leading article in *Le Figaro* blushed publicly in the name of France. M. Antoine is an eminent actor, who will at once adapt himself to the part of the riding-master. I advise you not to drag Zola into the affair any further, but to send a letter and a copy of the play direct to M. Antoine, Directeur du Théâtre Libre. They are fond of foreign plays.

“A great funeral is taking place outside with much gloomy pomp—it is Il Principe de Cavignani, Cousin of the King, Admiral-in-Chief of the Italian fleet. . . .

“Ah! what a light you have thrown upon your countrymen, the Swedes. And how envious I am! You underrate your good fortune: *O fortunatus nimium sua si bona nesciunt*—in not being a German. No other civilization but the French is worth while, there is no sham about it, it is based on reason itself—and must necessarily be the right one. Do you wish a proof of it? You are yourself a proof!

“For many years I have been reading nothing but the *Journal des Débats*. In expectation of this opening of my little Panama Canal toward France, I have indefinitely postponed the further publication of any new writings of mine—three are quite ready for the press. The next thing will be the translation of the two leading books, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *The Twilight of the Idols*—with these I shall then be introduced to France.

“With all good wishes.

“NIETZSCHE.”

This letter is followed almost immediately by another. Nietzsche has grown impatient. It is dated from Turin, December 7, 1888. He asks whether his previous letter could have been lost—and recounts his admiration for Strindberg’s *Père*—“that masterpiece of hard psychology” and once more suggests that he compel Zola to present it on the Parisian stage. He proceeds:

“There is no doubt that the hereditary criminal is decadent, even feeble-minded. But the history of criminal families, for which a vast

amount of material has been collected by Galton in his *Hereditary Genius*, always leads us back to some individual who happened to be too strong for some particular stratum of society. The last great trial of the criminal Prado gives us a classical example. Prado was superior to his judges and his lawyers in self-control, spirit and audacity. In spite of this the severe strain he had been under had produced such heavy physical consequences that certain witnesses were able to recognize him only by means of old portraits.

"And now a few words between ourselves—entirely between ourselves. When your letter reached me yesterday—the first letter in all my life which did *reach* me—it happened that I was just busy with the last manuscript revision of *Ecce Homo*. Since there are no more accidents in my life—I cannot regard you as an accident either! Why do you write letters which arrive at such moments as this?

"*Ecce Homo* ought to appear simultaneously in German, French and English. I sent the manuscript to my own publisher yesterday—as soon as a sheet is ready, it must be given into the hands of translators. But where are these translators to be found? Upon my word, I had no idea that you yourself were responsible for the excellent French into which your *Vater* has been translated! I thought it was really a masterful translation. In case you should yourself be willing to undertake the French translation of my work, I should consider myself the luckiest of mortals in being so favored by this miracle of a propitious coincidence.

"Between ourselves, in order to translate my *Ecce Homo* a poet of the first order is required. It is an expression, a *raffinement* of feeling, a thousand miles above the capabilities of the ordinary 'translator.' Nor is it by any means a long work—the French edition (possibly by Lemerre, the publisher of Paul Bourget?) would make one of their usual volumes at 3fr. 50. Since it contains absolutely unheard-of things, and if I may say so, is written in the language of a world-commander, we shall exceed even *Nana* in the number of our editions.

"Then again it is anti-German to the verge of annihilation. I am on the side of French civilization throughout the entire work (the German philosophers I call 'unconscious' counterfeits). Nor is the book in any case a dull one. I have written it in quite a 'Prado' style. In order to protect myself against German brutality (confiscation) I intend to send the first copies, before publication, to Prince Bismarck and the young Kaiser with a written declaration of war: only the military and not the police will be permitted to answer me. I am a psychologist.

"I trust, dear Sir, that you will give this matter your kind consideration. It is something of supreme importance. For I am powerful enough to break the history of humanity into two parts."

The peculiar rancour of Nietzsche against his own country is strongly in evidence in the foregoing letter. It is due largely to the pathological condition in which he happened to be at that time. At heart he was in all essentials a true German.

Strindberg's answer is as follows:

"It gave me great pleasure to receive a few words from your master-hand with regard to my much misunderstood tragedy. I must tell you that I was forced to give the publisher the proceeds of the complete editions before he would agree to its publication. And then in recompense for this, an old lady fell dead during the performance at the theater, another woman fainted and when the straight-jacket* was produced on the stage, three-fourths of the audience rose like one man and ran from the theater bellowing like mad bulls!

"And you expect me to ask M. Zola to have my play produced for the Parisiennes of Henri Becque! I'm afraid it would have deplorable consequences in that city of *Maris Complaisants*.

"And with regard to your affair.

"I sometimes write directly in French (see the inclosed article with its '*boulevard*,' and yet somewhat picturesque style)—and at other times I translate my own works.

"It is almost impossible to find a French translator who would not try to 'improve' one's style according to the rules of the Normal School of Rhetoric, and deprive one's expression of all its fresh originality. The horrible translation of *Married Folk*, was made by a French Swiss for 1,000 francs. He was paid every penny of this—in spite of which it became necessary afterward to pay a further 500 francs in Paris for a complete revision. You will therefore be in a position to understand that I must regard the question of translating your book from a financial point of view, and inasmuch as I am only a poor devil (wife, three children, two servants, debts, and so forth) I could not afford to do it for less, especially since it is to be a piece of poet's work and not a mere hack's. If you are not deterred by this somewhat heavy expense, you may count upon me and my ability. On the other hand, I should be very glad to look up some reliable French translator for you—as reliable as you may expect to find.

"With regard to England I have really nothing to say, for there we have to deal with a puritanical land, delivered into the hands of women—which signifies the same thing as having fallen into a state of absolute decadence. English morality—you know what that means, my dear sir! Subscription libraries for the young person—Currer Bell, Miss Braddon and the rest! I advise you to keep clear of all that! In French you will penetrate even to the world of the blackamoors and you may snap your fingers at England. Pray consider this matter and my proposal and let me hear from you at your earliest convenience.

"Awaiting your answer I remain with expressions of the highest esteem,

Yours,

"AUGUST STRINDBERG."

It is interesting to read of Strindberg's judgment upon the English literature of his day. The stony barriers of Anglican puritanism have since then been broken down by several modern writers, and yet so far as *bourgeois* or

*The straight-jacket referred to is that which is produced in the last act of "The Father"—in order to confine him.

family literature is concerned, his judgment still holds good. But he was wrong in his belief that England would offer no hospitality to Nietzsche. The writer is able to record that the complete English edition of Nietzsche has proved an uncommon success, due to the valiant siege laid to Britain by Dr. Oscar Levy, the scholarly leader of the English Nietzscheans, and the group of brilliant young men he has gathered about him.

Again the letters crossed; for it appears that Nietzsche's letter of December 7th reached Strindberg only after he had sent off the foregoing one. The epistle of his that follows, bears the date of December 27th and is written from Holte where the Swedish author was at that time living with his first wife.

"I acknowledge the receipt of your gracious letter and the magnificent *Genealogy of Morals*. I am once more encroaching upon your time with a poetic piece of work. It contains my observations on the problem of 'Pangs of Conscience'—and was written before I became acquainted with your works.

"My childish remarks, especially those about the future of the female sex and European peace—subjects which were epidemic in Switzerland where I lived at the time I wrote this 'Pangs of Conscience,' you must not take too seriously.

"I wish you a happy new year for 1889, and hope you will accept once more the assurances of my loftiest admiration.

"AUGUST STRINDBERG."

This letter reached Nietzsche when he had already begun to battle with the madness that was laying siege to his magnificent intellect. Strindberg's New Year's greeting sounds like some bitter mockery. Nietzsche's brief response is couched in that strange and cryptic language, full of tragic suggestion and the sense of farewell which dominated all his letters to his friends in these last few days before the final collapse of his mind under a stroke of paralysis.

"DEAR SIR:—You will receive an answer to your story in due course—it sounds like a rifle-shot. I have commanded a royal holiday at Rome,—I wish to order a fusillade.

"Until we meet again! For we shall meet again.

"*Une seule condition; Divorçons. . . .*

"NIETZSCHE CAESAR."

This amazing letter must have reacted strangely upon Strindberg. He remarked afterward that he fancied

Nietzsche was joking, but in his own reply there are undeniable traces of bewilderment, horror and confusion. The answer is in itself a masterpiece of conflicting emotions. It was written in Greek and Latin:

"DEAREST DOCTOR:—'I will, I will be mad!'

"Not without perturbation did I receive your letter and I thank you for it.

"'More rightly wilt thou live, Licinius, if thou wilt not always steer forth upon the high seas, nor, cowering fearfully before the storm, cling too closely to the treacherous coast.'

"In the mean time, all hail to madness!

"Adieu and keep in kind remembrance—

"YOUR STRINDBERG.

"(The best, the highest God.)"

Nietzsche's answer was a single line, the last flash of his mind—wrung forth in his final agony:

HERR STRINDBERG:—*Eheu! No more! Divorçons!*

THE CRUCIFIED ONE.

And thus these two tempestuous spirits who had approached and spoken to each other across the gulfs of time and space, stood rudely divorced. The night of a ten years' mental oblivion settled upon the hapless philosopher of the Superman, while Strindberg, the wild, eccentric genius of the North pursued the way to his own Calvary of domestic unhappiness and restless opposition to the restraints of life and environment. And now both have vanished into the void, and two new lights glitter among those stars that sway the destinies of humanity.

HERMAN SCHEFFAUER.